



In Search for a Sociology of Social Problems

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**Abstract for
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– Past, present and future
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In search for a sociology of social problems for social work practice

The development of sociological theories, communities for research in social problems, and the teaching of social problems have most explicitly taken place within a specific societal context, namely the USA. This is often referred to as a contextual problem; the United States of America is a society different from other societies.

Contextual sensitivity seems important when social problems are perceived as complex social phenomena, whose apparent objective character cannot be isolated from processes of subjective and/or social constructions related to the social forms and structures on different levels of a specific society. From a social work practice perspective this seems reasonable too. Social workers face different social problems and work in different ways depending on the societal context. Therefore it seems 'natural' that the understanding and explanation of social problems varies with the context of observation. However, it is sometimes unclear in what sense and to what extent contextual variation should be taken into account.

As an example, in Scandinavia there is no explicit development of a 'Scandinavian' sociological theory of social problems similar to the tradition in USA. Therefore research seldom addresses the understanding and explanation of social problems explicitly and directly as a phenomenon of interest in itself. The interest in social problems, has to a wide extent been captured under the heading of often quantitative 'welfare state research' focusing on e.g. the degree of welfare and the suffering within certain groups in society based on what is commonly viewed as 'objective' needs. Later an expansion in qualitative research in welfare institutions, social work and 'users', focusing on the subjective and/or social construction of social problems has also taken place. Today both forms for research traditions are inspired by sociologies of both USA and Europe, often in a combination. One can say that the actual use of sociological theories challenges in-

stitutionalized borders of context, hence the idea of a 'Scandinavian' approach. One could criticize this, or ask more constructively what problem this praxis is a solution to?

In this paper, I will try to explore the obstacles and potentials for developing theories explicitly focusing on social problems and in a sense adequate for both research in social welfare and social work practice. The paper will show that within the sociology of social problems developed in USA, there are potentials but also obstacles, which can be related to more general problems of sociology. These problems cannot necessarily be solved by a contextual argument e.g. the idea of a 'Scandinavian' approach, because basically they relate to a more fundamental problem of bi-polar differentiation in science theoretical approaches and in the conception of the constitution of society within sociology. These differentiations are not easily overcome. They are fundamental problems of knowledge. However a main argument of the paper is that it might be possible to overcome these obstacles if we find a 'point of view' which allows us to look across them. Here the paper argues that in all cases *the complex and practical relation between the identification of certain problematic conditions and the action towards them is unclear, if not overlooked*. Sociology in general and sociology of social problems underestimates this complex relation; a relation which is inherent in social work practice. So perhaps a way to begin to overcome obstacles related to bi-polar differentiations is to challenge and develop sociological theory of social problems on the basis of and in the empirical exploration of this practical relation? Perhaps we can create a more adequate *practical sociological language* which can facilitate reflection over the complexity of social problems and the solutions to them in social work as well as in society in general?

The paper consists of two major parts. In the first part, I will explore, discuss and identify obstacles as well as potentials within the sociology of social problems. In the second part, and on the basis of the first, I will try to formulate a new general approach for the development of theories of social problems which are suitable for the understanding, explanation and practical approach to social welfare and social work. In the end of the paper, I will discuss and identify what kind of further empirical and theoretical research would facilitate the development of theories of social problems. As such the aim of the paper is to lay the ground for the development of theories of social problems more adequate for social work practice.

The paper will be based on theoretical discussions made in my PhD as well as later elaborations including references to sociological theories in general, sociological theories of social problems and not the least theories of and knowledge about social work

Nissen 2005: In the Eye of the Treatment. About social problems, intervention and change in social work with families and children in 24-hour institutions of family treatment (Published in Danish)